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Dear council members,

It is the position of the Young Progressives Demanding Action, representing some 500+ registered members in Hawaii, that bills seeking to expand sit/lie bans and homeless "sweeps" conducted by the city effectively criminalize homelessness and punish people for being poor.

Not only are these measures cruel, they do absolutely nothing to address the actual causes of homelessness and are merely political appeasement to businesses and privileged citizens. To be clear, we understand that homeless individuals sitting or laying down on sidewalks can have adverse affects on both businesses and property values, but passing laws that will end up jailing these individuals for actions they can sometimes do nothing about is not the answer.

Not only does it demonstrate a callousness toward the most vulnerable among us, it will only swell our already overcrowded jail system with nonviolent offenders who cannot afford to make bail and who must be housed and fed on the taxpayers' dime. Eventually these individuals will be released and nothing will have changed. They will continue to sit and lie outside of businesses, and no one will win. These bills create a lose-lose situation hidden behind a veneer of action that will only allow politicians to claim they are doing something about the problem, when in fact they are not.

We believe that if the council and state legislators were truly serious about addressing the homeless problem, they would invest the amount of money necessary to develop comprehensive mental health and drug abuse programs; they would invest in expanding shelter options to include alternatives that may attract homeless individuals who refuse to enter traditional shelter settings; and they would fund programs designed to get homeless people back on their feet, including job training programs, expediting I.D. services (as opposed to confiscating property) and expanding housing first programs and incentives to landlords to accept housing subsidies like section 8.

We believe that if politicians should get serious about abolishing the bail and bail-bond system; amending sentencing laws and reducing our jail population instead of adding to it. We believe they should get serious about enforcing existing laws to regulate illegal vacation rentals, which have a significant impact on our pool of available, affordable housing. We believe they should get serious about developing truly affordable housing in the urban core, not housing at or above the median income level.

If politicians were serious about ending this problem, they would spend time in shelters and with homeless people and making a serious effort to understand and empathize with them. If politicians were serious about ending homelessness, they would get serious about ending economic and social inequality, because that is what causes homelessness in the first place. Sweeping homeless people under the rug or shifting from the one neighborhood to the next using sweeps cannot even be considered a "temporary solution." It is no solution at all.

For these reasons, we urge the council to kill these bills and work earnestly toward introducing legislation that addresses the root causes of homelessness and ending socioeconomic inequality in our state.

Mahalo,

Will Caron
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